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ABSTRACT

Rural schools traditionally have played a central role in their communities. Now, as rural communities face declining quality of life and threats to their viability, collaborative partnerships between communities and schools offer a promising approach to community revitalization and survival. Researchers have identified three distinct, yet related approaches to building strong school-community relationships: (1) school as community center, in which the school becomes a resource for lifelong learning and delivers a wide range of educational, health, and social services; (2) community as curriculum, emphasizing student involvement in the study of community in all its complexity; and (3) school-based enterprise, in which students develop entrepreneurial skills by identifying service needs in the community and establishing a business to address those needs. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has used all three approaches as starting points in its Community Development Partnership (CDP) project, pilot tested in three small isolated northwestern communities. CDP features include recognition of the importance of place; belief that community development must address social and environmental dimensions of community well-being, not just economics; and vision- and consensus-building activities. Important elements in sustaining partnerships over time are a strong base of community support, engagement of teachers in related curriculum work, and long-term commitment. Long-term partnerships will change fundamentally the way that schools prepare rural youth for the future. (SV)

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THE ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

By Bruce A. Miller

An ERIC Digest

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The Role of Rural Schools in Rural Community Development

by Bruce A. Miller

ERIC DIGEST

Over the past decade, efforts have been under way to help rural schools become more responsive to the development needs of their communities. This digest discusses progress made in using the school as a community development resource. This discussion should be of special interest to rural educators, community development practitioners, and rural community leaders.

Rural Schools and Community Needs

Rural schools traditionally have played a central role in their communities. Besides providing for basic education, they often have served as a cultural center in the community. Athletics, drama programs, music, and other social activities conducted at schools have played a vital part in rural community life and identity formation dating back to the 19th century.

Many rural communities now face a decline in their quality of life due to the 1980s economic downturn and the 1990s globalization of the marketplace. Businesses have closed and many young and well-educated citizens have left for urban areas. Additionally, social services, including schools, have been regionalized or consolidated as cost-cutting measures (Beaulieu & Mulkey, 1995; Miller, 1993). These trends have led to high levels of unemployment and the deterioration of rural economic, social, and environmental well-being.

Many rural advocates believe a promising direction for the revitalization and survival of communities lies in creating and sustaining collaborative partnerships with schools (Hobbs, 1991; Miller, 1993; Monk & Haller, 1986; Nachtigal, Haas, Parker, & Brown, 1989; Spears, Combs, & Bailey, 1990). However, building strong partnerships is not easy. It requires a shared vision about the importance of community building and the school's role in supporting long-term communitywide change.

Schools and communities in some rural areas have begun collaborating to provide experiences for students that serve both educational and community development goals (Stern, Stone, Hopkins, McMillion, & Crain, 1994; Spears, Combs, & Bailey, 1990). For example, in Broadus, Montana, students worked with a community beautification task force to redesign local buildings using a western theme. This collaboration involved residents, an architect, and the vocational education teacher (Miller, 1993).

Three Interrelated Approaches

Researchers have identified three distinctive, yet related, approaches that can build strong relationships between schools and communities (Miller, 1993). Each approach helps students and community members cross traditional boundaries that have separated communities and schools.

The first approach uses the *school as a community center*. The school becomes a resource for lifelong learning and a vehicle for delivering a wide range of services (Everson, 1994). School facilities, technology, and well-educated staff members can provide a wide range of educational and retraining opportunities for the whole community. In an early version of this approach, the community school movement of the 1970s, schools offered educational opportunities ranging from day care to adult literacy (Minzey & LeTarte, 1972). A recent version of the school-as-community-center approach is the development of *integrated family services*. In this approach, the school collaborates with social service providers to meet the needs of rural youth and families (Stoops & Hull, 1993). Services may include health screening, day care, and dental treatment. For example, in Saco, Montana, the school district has received funding to create a fiber-optic network that will link them to two other remote communities. The network will provide training for health professionals and fire departments. Moreover, it will network schools and communities to help them share resources (Miller, 1995a).

A second approach uses the *community as curriculum*, emphasizing the study of community in all its complexity. Students generate information for community development by conducting needs assessments, studying and monitoring environmental and land-use patterns, and documenting local history through interviews and photo essays. Nachtigal has written extensively in this area (see Nachtigal, Haas, Parker, & Brown, 1989). He points out that when students study their community and get directly involved with local residents, they tend to value their community more highly.

The best known and most comprehensive approach to community as curriculum is the Foxfire network, which provides training and a support network for teachers (Smith, 1991). Foxfire engages students in learning about their community through direct encounters with its history. Students learn to interview residents and construct narratives that help preserve the historical context of communities for future generations.

A third approach, school-based enterprise (SBE), emphasizes *school as developer of entrepreneurial skill*. Students identify potential service needs in their rural communities and establish a business to address those needs. Sher and DeLargy have turned the SBE idea into a curriculum program for rural schools called REAL (Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning). With the help of REAL, students have set up businesses such as a shoe repair, delicatessen, and day-care center. In this way they have provided both employment and services not readily available previously (in Stern et al., 1994). Like Foxfire, REAL is a comprehensive program that provides curriculum, training, and a support network.

These three interrelated approaches provide a way to think about how schools and communities can work together for their mutual benefit. The long-term benefits of these school-community partnerships may include leadership development, renewed civic responsibility, and a revitalized sense of community.

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Community Development and the School

Researchers at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) have used all three approaches as starting points for helping schools find ways to collaborate with their communities to provide services and educate youth. In 1992, the Rural Education Program at NWREL began pilot testing a rural community development model in three small, isolated rural communities in the Northwest. The model, Community Development Partnership (CDP), was designed to build local capacity for renewal and growth by using local school district resources, such as students, teachers, facilities, and equipment. Student involvement provided an opportunity for youth to work alongside adults and to develop skills and competencies required for successful citizen involvement.

At the center of the CDP process is the importance of *place* in the beliefs and values of rural people. These people choose to live in small, rural communities because there is something they value about the place. They may value the environment, the people, the isolation, the opportunity to be self-sufficient, the small size, or a combination of these characteristics. Whatever the reason, place and what that place has come to mean provide fertile ground for building a solidarity of purpose. Developing a recognition of this common ground provides a motivational basis upon which to unite a community in action.

A second premise of the CDP models is the belief that community development must address more than economics. In fact, without efforts made to improve the social and environmental dimensions of community well-being, it is unlikely that economic growth can occur and be sustained (Flora & Flora, 1993).

The CDP model incorporates vision- and consensus-building activities designed to unite the community in action. Activities include figuring out community-school readiness, selecting and training a community coordinator, and holding a series of community meetings. The meetings result in the creation of a structure for empowering the community and school to address local development issues. By participating in these activities, students develop skills needed to be effective members of a community, strengthening their rural identities and employability.

Results from the CDP pilot tests provide evidence that the school can play a vital role as a resource in community development. All three communities used school materials, equipment and facilities for meetings. They also developed projects to address community needs. Examples of such projects include creation of a summer recreation program for youth and adults, passage of a bond for a new school, development of a community cultural center targeting at-risk youth, beginning a REAL program, and formation of a $200,000 private fund to provide community development grants. Teachers, students and school administrators participated in all activities. However, both the quantity and quality of involvement varied among sites. Although all sites showed sustained changes in their communities, only one community sustained and expanded all elements of the initial pilot effort (Miller, 1995b).

Lessons and Implications

Many elements of the community and school need attention if such community development partnerships are to be established and sustained over time. Most important, developing a support base in the community provides a strong foundation upon which to build lasting community-based learning experiences. Secondly, engaging teachers in curriculum work that links student service activities in the classroom with projects in the community appears to be crucially important. Programs like Foxfire and REAL may provide a beginning framework upon which to build. By helping teachers and students see the potential of community-based learning experiences, these programs can pave the way for greater involvement in community development. Finally, making a long-term commitment is critically important. The ultimate test of such community and school partnerships is the impact they have on the lives of rural youth and adults over an extended period of partnership. Participants must remain mindful of the fact that by building community-school development partnerships, they are changing fundamentally the way their schools prepare rural youth for the future.

Conclusion

Rural schools, working in partnership with local leaders and residents, can have a positive impact on community viability. This is especially true when students, working alongside adults, have opportunities to engage in meaningful community-based learning that both serves the community and addresses their learning needs. By building on the social capital present in youth and schools, the community helps to develop responsible citizens for today and skilled leaders for tomorrow.

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